NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING

A Reader of Myths and Legends

Edited by

Karl Kroeber

Blackwell Publishing

NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING

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TO THE READER

Be warned – you will have difficulty understanding the Native American stories in this collection. They are told in a fashion contrary to what you expect, since our idea of a good narrative is one filled with suspense: what will happen next? Suspense is of no importance in these tales. The form of American Indian storytelling is entirely different from the form of our storytelling. One reason for the radical difference is that all the North American Indians developed their cultures without writing. In an oral culture (a life in which nothing is written – today almost impossible to imagine) storytelling is enormously important and serves many complex and subtle but always practical functions. An Indian story is not just an airport time-killer.

Ah, you may think – myths. Many of the stories in this collection are indeed myths, but your conception of what myths are and what practical functions they served for Native Americans is probably wrong – especially if you have read or seen on television popular descriptions of ''primitive myths'' by ''experts'' like Mircea Eliade or Joseph Campbell, or some more recent and less famous pundits peddling misinformation through terms like ''universal symbol'' or ''archetype.''

Your best chance of enjoying this book is to not worry about ''myth'' at all and concentrate on why Native American stories are so weirdly different from our stories. The culture of a society that does not use writing, where most culture does not exist until someone speaks, is very largely constituted by storytelling. This is one reason Indians tell their stories over and over again. Several of the narratives in this collection we know were being told more than 400 years ago, many probably originated centuries before that, and all of them

are certainly more than a century old (although some, like the Hopi story of the deadly hide-and-seek game, are still being told to this day). Stories that had been retold for years, decades, even generations were familiar to everyone but the youngest children. Since Native American cultures did not favor professional storytellers, and everyone told stories, listeners to a story might well have told that story themselves, perhaps many times. So suspense, passive curiosity as to what happens next, was of little interest to any Indian.

American Indian storytelling is somewhat like our performing of and listening to music. The man who buys a ticket to a performance of, say, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is hoping to hear familiar sounds. His knowledge of this symphony and other works by Beethoven enables him to appreciate deeply the special qualities of the unique performance he pays to hear. An Indian listening to a familiar story was in an analogous position (but didn't pay), with the difference, first, that he himself was likely to have been a recitalist. Indian stories were performed for performers. And the story, of course, was constructed of words, not just sounds (although not infrequently the sound of words contributed significantly to the narrative effect, as rarely happens in our printed stories). The Indian audience listened very carefully to each teller's particular vocal inflections, verbal innovations, rhetorical omissions and additions, shifts in the order of events, modifications of character, and so forth, because these performative qualities endowed the old story with its special *contemporary* relevance. Alterations usually made the story particularly applicable to current circumstances, community issues, familial difficulties, new ideas about traditional practices. Perhaps one member of the tribal group was causing difficulties; somebody would tell an old story about a character who caused the same sort of trouble for his group. Everyone knew who, as Indians say, ''the arrow of the story was pointed at'' (including the target); communal pressure was exerted without openly embarrassing the trouble-maker or his relatives. And, most important, the criticism came in a form that enabled everyone by an act of individual imagination to participate in a group reaffirmation of the wisdom and usefulness of traditional culture.

This is one simple example of how old stories always entered into contemporary life – many Native Americans have testified to the powerful personal effect of stories as arrows. Other functions were subtler and more complex. Frequently a retelling was a response to another recent retelling, with modifications of details and shifts in plot emphasis being understood by the audience as a rebuttal or challenge that might suggest a different fashion of applying traditional ideas to immediate circumstances. Storytelling was a recognized way of ''debating'' solutions to practical personal, social, and political contemporary problems.

Native Americans were necessarily very practical people. For most of them, sheer physical survival was not easy. And all of them were acutely aware that the

natural world is continually changing and that it constantly required of them new ways of adapting to it. Hunting and gathering played a significant role in every one of the more than 400 cultures in Native North America, so the Indians were always moving about, and encountering peoples with entirely different languages and customs, sometimes belligerently hostile. Indians did not sit around telling traditional stories because they were archetypal. Some stories were told for amusement and relaxation, but a majority were active applications of tribal historical experience to specific current issues, communal as well as individual. Storytelling served to enable the group to evaluate whether old procedures and ideas were still the most effective, or needed to be altered to suit new circumstances.

You cannot appreciate the stories in this volume unless you recognize that they are constructed as they are because their aim is not simply to preserve rigid traditions. Their purpose is to subject cultural practices – *and the psychological and social forces that created them* – to careful scrutiny to assess whether or not institutionalized practices need to be revised or can be reaffirmed. The great age of the stories means they are the result of many reworkings and refinements. These reshapings sharpened the efficacy of the storytelling evaluations, assuring the stories' historical wisdom was not dogmatic but dynamic. The stories had been shaped by their function as a means for uncontroversially examining against particular new conditions psychological and social tensions and pressures that had led to the institution of specific social practices. These practices embodied deeply cherished beliefs and firmly established patterns of behavior because they had worked effectively. Were they as a reliable as ever, or did unprecedented circumstances suggest modifications to sustain their efficaciousness?

Indian stories, including myths, endured for generations by continually being reconfigured. These retellings resulted in a slow, careful refining through the imaginativeness and verbal skills of many tellers. Constantly revised, the stories became more dense, more subtle, their form gradually perfected to an economical sharpness like a well-flaked arrow point – with every word and sentence contributing to an increasingly complex and nuanced meaningfulness. These stories could serve as instruments of social readjustment because their form, their artistry, had taken shape through a history of constant engagement with practical necessities. An insuperable obstacle to our appreciation of Native American storytelling is that we encounter each tale only once, in a single form. Other tellings, other performances, unknown to us, always influenced the Indian audience's understanding of a specific retelling of a tale. Despite our lack of knowledge of this *internal history* of each narrative, its careful reworkings over time, endowing it with artistic form, offer some insight into its potency as a useful, self-reflexive constituent of the dynamics of a Native American society.

Every story ever told, whether an account of something that truly happened or a fairy tale, whether printed or orally recited, articulates an act of imagination by the teller – and the story is understood by its audience through an equivalent exercise of imagination. By learning to understand the artistic form of a story, its imaginative structure, we can discover something of its deepest meaning and identify some of its probable effects on its original audiences. This is the process we use in learning to appreciate the *Odyssey*, for example, which was created in a culture that vanished three thousand years ago, and of which we have very little knowledge except what we can deduce from the Homeric epics. We use the same process, usually with more consciousness of its difficulties, when we undertake the study of a foreign literature – say, Japanese Kabuki theater. Of course, the more we can learn about the different or extinct culture the better, but finally, the depth and cogency of our understanding of the work of an alien literature depends most of all on the sensitivity we can develop to the imaginative configuring of its language – its artistic form.

The problems posed by Indian stories to this process are formidable. There were more than four hundred distinct cultures, with as many separate languages, in aboriginal North America. Because of the genocidal fury of the European invasion of the American continent, many of these cultures were totally destroyed, and all were severely ravaged. What information we have about them is thanks to a tiny band of "salvage anthropologists" who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, undertook an unprecedented program of saving and recording all aspects of the cultures that remained, often collecting information and stories from literally the last survivor of a culture and last speaker of a now extinct language. To this was added the heroic efforts of the Indians themselves, who in the last seventy years have worked assiduously against terrific obstacles, political and economic, to revive their diverse cultural heritages. Given this situation it is impossible for a non-specialist to have much knowledge of the cultural context out of which the various Indian narratives in this collection emerged. And here Alexander Pope's caution is particularly appropriate – "a little learning is a dangerous thing." Having taught this material for many years at Columbia University, I am painfully aware how much false information and how many misconceptions about American Indians are abroad. For non-specialists, the best way to gain valid insight into the mindsets of diverse Indian peoples is through understanding of the imaginative processes revealed by stories that in fact largely created and sustained their cultures.

Trouble is, this is hard work. It's easier to let some "expert" tell you what to think about Native Americans. One has to begin by disabling ingrained preconceptions about what makes a "good" story. In Indian stories plot often serves mainly to bring into meaningful contrast parallel actions, scenes, characters, and

speeches that have no direct causal connection. This large rhetorical structure is supported by a preference for paratactic sentences. Where we are likely to say ''Because it becomes cold, bears hibernate,'' the paratactic Indian style is ''Bears hibernate. It snows.'' Our style is to connect the two parts of the sentence with an unequivocal cause–effect relation, a relation often made equivocal in Indian stories. It is not that Indians necessarily believe that bears hibernating cause winter, but they are more modest than we in assuming they infallibly know what causes things to happen. Generally, the Indians found their world more complicated, uncertain, and changeable than we do ours. The paratactic style leaves more to listeners' imaginations – they are not *told* what the relation of two events is; they are encouraged to imagine different possibilities and implications of the relationship.

Analogously, we are likely to encounter late in a Native American story a character who seemingly has no connection with any other characters. If we examine what happens to the new character, what he does or thinks, we will probably see that in some way his circumstances or actions parallel that of a character we have met earlier, and in some way presents a dramatic contrast. This contrastive parallelism is what Native American tellers and listeners concentrated on – in such similarities and differences the deepest meanings of the stories are embodied. The Indian teller evokes his listeners' freedom to imagine. The teller does not trace out explicit connections; he provokes listeners to conceive of these. He is not telling a story he privately invented but one that belongs to his people, one that has been told before and will be told again by others. Indians valued excellent recitalists, especially if they were inventive and innovative. But tellers and audience sought new meanings in old stories. Indian tellers did not ''express'' their subjective feelings; they exerted their talents in the service of stories worth telling because they sustained the health of their community.

Indian storytelling depends on more active imaginative participation in the story by the audience than is asked by our fiction. If you are more than twelve years old and an admirer of the Harry Potter books you will probably not enjoy these Indian narratives, because they require vigorous *independence* of imaginative response from each member of their audience, helping each to become more useful to the community. The Harry Potter books are very easy to read because they encourage us to be passive, to let somebody else imagine for us by staying within entirely expected patterns of fantasy, the commodified imagery that characterizes most popular contemporary fiction. Our ''fantasy'' is tame, pallid, and unspectacular compared to what we find in the Native American narratives, in which anything can happen: a woman with a hole in the top of her head into which she reaches to take out some brains to drop them in the food she is preparing; an old man with a penis thirty feet long; a girl who eats her